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JOLIET JUNIOR COLLEGE

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Interviewers

Daniel Conner  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(signature)

April 29, 1974  
(date)

Interviewee

Steve Watter  
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(address)

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(city & state)

April 29, 1974  
(date)



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INTERVIEWEE: Otto Mattei

INTERVIEWER: Dan Conner

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Otto A. Mattei for the Oral History Class of Joliet Junior College by Dan Conner at 1110 Gardner Street on May 29th at 1:30 p.m.

CONNER: Mr. Mattei, I'd just like to ask you to tell me when you were born, and where.

MATTEI: I was born March 25, 1899, in San Benidetto, Italy.

CONNER: How long did you live there?

MATTEI: My first eight years was spent there. I came to Joliet in September of 1907.

CONNER: Where did you reside at?

MATTEI: In Joliet here.

CONNER: What was your address?

MATTEI: My first address was on Hills Avenue. One hundred something Hills Avenue.

CONNER: Where did you attend grade school?

MATTEI: I first attended grade school in Joliet at Lincoln School on the northeast side of town. My second grade school in town here was the Park Avenue School.



From there I went to the Central School which was where Penney's, Woolworth is today in that lot. I entered high school in 1914.

CONNER: When did you first get interested in music?

MATTEI: I first became interested in music in about 1907 when I first came here. I had two brothers that played in the Dellwood Park Band under Walter S. West. They played clarinet; my brother Richard played clarinet and my brother played the saxophone--the straight saxophone, soprano. Then I was interested. I used to go to all the band concerts at Dellwood Park in those days. They used to have thirteen band concerts a week. Every night of the week and every afternoon with the exception of Monday was a band concert at Dellwood Park. If you go out to Dellwood Park today you can still see the bandshell. Well, I played in that bandshell. I played there when I was about fifteen years old, my first appearance with the band. As I said before, I was very much interested in band work and I began to learn my instrument. At the age of I'll say ten or eleven years old I played with one of the first Joliet grade school bands, and my brother was the conductor, my brother Guido. I played there from ten to fourteen--1910 to 1914--. Prior to going into high school, I played with the high school band a couple years, not because I was a celebrity, but because I was a rarity. The saxophone was rare. It was the only one available. Then when I entered high school, I stayed in the band until the war broke out in 1917, the first world war. We got in it in '18 I believe, and I enlisted in the service. I got as far as Jefferson Barracks,





and they sent me back. I wasn't qualified on account of my eyes at that time. There was too many, so I came home. And then I didn't go back to school, but I played with the Steel Works band. Then I played with the Moline Plowmill Band over in Moline, Illinois. After Moline, I played with the Italian Municipal Band we had here. We used to rehearse at St. Anthony's Church. I played with the Shabbona Band. A. R. Mc Allister played the cornet in the Shabbona Band. See, I've jumped the gun. Really I should go back a few years. In 1915 I played with the Dellwood Park Band under Mr. Adams. Mr. A. R. Mc Allister, Sr. was playing trumpet at the time. By the way, that was a very fine band. The rehearsals were held in the afternoon as concerts. Those were the rehearsals really, and in the evening it was the performances, and it worked out very good. We had men play there that they were finished musicians. They were marvelous! Anything you put in front of them they'd play with no mistakes--read at sight. We had some with a tremendous amount of experience expecially in the clarínets. We had one clarinet that his tone hasn't been equaled by anybody that ever existed in Joliet. Nobody ever equaled the tone of Marco Blazio on the clarinet. He played on an old Albert System clarinet. His smoothness of playing his execution on his instrument was beautiful, unbelievably beautiful. I never heard the clarinet that sweet since. Well, we got to where now? One of the reasons here in Joliet we've had very great success with bands is due to the fact of origin. Back in 1906, 1907 the streetcar line opened up Dellwood Park, and they hired Mr. Walter S. West to be the conductor of the band.



There weren't that many good musicians around here. Walter West himself was a capable musician. He came here from Bloomington, and he recruited men from any place he could get them that had good musicians. He could recruit them because he offered them a daytime job and concerts in the afternoon and night. So these men made. . .at that time if they made \$60 a week that was equal to, I'll say \$500 a week today. That's good money. Want me to name some of the men he brought here? He recruited such men as George Hendricks on baritone. He recruited John Pica, trumpet. His grandson plays in the Legion Band today; he's a clarinet player.

CONNER: Bob Pica?

MATTEI: Yes. He recruited Fishwick--tremendous bass player. Another man by the name of Puoro, Louis Puoro, a tremendous base player. Harry Dawes, drummer; Marco Blazio, clarinet; my brother Richard, clarinet; Billy Holms, flute and piccolo; he was a piano tuner and he's an uncle to Hascall Harp, the drummer. He's a great authority on drums. He wrote a lot of drum material and drum methods. There was a composer that was related to him, too. He wrote a lot of good saxophone music. But anyway, we recruited a tremendous amount and later on. . . Harry Burst was another one. These men began to teach privately. There was many more that I can't think of right now. They began to turn out good material, good musicians. Later on we had a woman here by the name of Fields. That was a terrific trumpet teacher, cornet teacher, one of the best that we ever had. Later on we had a fellow by the name of Charlie Cresenti, a clarinet teacher. He was my cousin. His son teaches band here today. My own son later on became





later on became president of the high school band and the first clarinet player. He was the only clarinetist that was sent to play with the Armco Band which was a national organization that every Sunday a star of some high school would perform with this orchestra. That was quite a goal for kids to aim at, to get to go. Archie McAllister choose him and sent him to Cincinnati to play with the Armco Band. Also these people began to teach and teach. There was a man by the name of Stillman that used to run the Stillman Drug Store that was president of the high school board I believe at the time. He was interested in getting a band, and McAllister was teaching manual training in the high school. So Stillman and McAllister happened to get together, and they got hold of a few instruments about 1910, 1911. They started a group, and the group used to meet in the manual training room sitting on kegs of nails, anything we could sit on to play. We developed a pretty good band. Band players got better and better. The band I played in in high school had only about 35 members. Today your high schools here--one high school's got three times that in its band, and we got three high schools. Then we got Catholic High here, Catholic grade schools. My brothers played more than I because they were older. We were very influential in teaching a lot of people. In fact, Charles Peters took lessons from my brother on trumpet. What else can I tell you? I worked for quite a few years with what they call a special certificate and every four years I had to take fifteen hours of academic and music subjects. I did this for quite a few years. Finally, I graduated. I got my college degree in 1962. After





I had enlisted and come back, I didn't bother with school for a period of maybe ten years, because I figured I didn't need it. I was working. I was making good money; I had the music store.

CONNER; When did you start the music store?

MATTEI; The music store started in '23. My Brother and I started that, and we called the Saxophone Shop, because we'd all performed on saxophones. We had a saxophone quintet, beautiful. We played everything that was good. You name it, and we played it. We entertained a lot of people. We entertained in many places for benefits, and so when we started the shop, we called it the Saxophone Shop. We played other instruments, too. We all played clarinet. My brother, Hugo, played French horn, one of the finest French horns you ever heard. The shop started in 1923 up in the Brown-Kiep building. That's upstairs of Kieps Jewelry Store. That's where the conservatory is. Right below the conservatory is where we started our music shop, saxophone shop. From there we moved over to Clinton Street. From the time . . . I was there just a while at that particular location, then we went over on Scott Street where the drug store is now on Scott Street in the Elks Building. We opened a piano store and music store and music studio. We were one of the first music studios. We sold pianos; we did beautifully. Then all of the sudden, 1929 came around. Business kept going down, down, down. Finally, I left that location. I went over on Chicago Street where the Singer Sewing Machine is today. I was there doing pretty good, kinda starting from scratch again. Then one night



the place burned down. There was other personal things. I had a lot of sickness in the family. From there I actually went broke; in 1931 I went broke. So we closed up the store, and I went over and started all over again, a music studio in the Elks Building on the second floor. I always had a sort of a soft spot for the Elks Building. I always liked that spot. That was like home. So I went back there, and I had Roland Meeks as a piano teacher, Robert Pierce as a drum percussion, and myself with the brass and the reeds. And we began to get back on our feet again. So after that, about a year and a half or two, or three, I moved downstairs. I got somebody to help me and I opened up the store where I am now, and that's been there ever since. I kept busy with my music, my bands. I took good care of my bands, that was my baby--I didn't pay too much attention to the store. That's why the store never went tremendous, but I always had enough to keep my head above water, and keep things coming and helping people. I helped more people than people helped me in a way--always gave more than what I got, much more. I never took advantage of a youngster, because he was ignorant, and didn't know what he was asking for. I could slip him a two cent reed for a quarter. I always gave him the best I could get. Many, many years ago, down in Rockdale during the depression days, I used to make a list of everybody that used to buy a reed from me or something and some of those kids owed me twenty-five cents for months and months. A reed would last a long time because a quarter in those days was as big as a dishpan. That's how scarce they were. So I gave a lot of boys and girls help that way, never collected for it. I would tear it up [laughter]. That's the only way I





could do it, That repaid itself a thousand times, All that I gave and never got paid for in money, I got paid for in many different ways by good will, by nice greetings, by people liking me, and some of them would remember me later and come in and give me business. I had the band down there in Rockdale many years ago. I had the band in Manhattan--I had the band in Manhattan for thirty years. I had the band in Elwood in '41, '42. The war was on, and kids would come and go. Kids would come in and never make very much progress, because the turnover was tremendous. I started the Guardian Angel Band; that was free. I did that for nothing. That was all worthwhile, and I helped there all I possibly could. To this day they have a musical organization up there. It will never amount to much, because it's not an orphanage anymore. My first meeting with John Philip Sousa was when I saw him conduct the United States Naval Band of the Great Lakes in 1918 at Grant Park. He had a tremendous, tremendous band. Can you imagine something like a hundred clarinets in a band, a hundred French horns, and maybe seventy-five basses and a hundred trombones? Everything is in tremendous number. That Grant Park was so full of music when they played the "Stars and Stripes Forever", (that was his closing number) that I can still hear it. It was terrific. I saw him that time. Later on he came to Joliet in 1927 to conduct and judge a contest. With him, was Captain O'Neil, E. F. Goldman. I was lucky enough to have A. R. Mc Allister introduce me to Mr. O'Neil, Mr. Sousa, and Mr. Goldman, but I never had any conversation with Sousa.





CONNER: What was your impression of Mr. Sousa?

MATTEI: I envied him; I wished I could be like him mentally, physically and the ability he had. And he conducted so beautifully; he made no motions to speak of. He didn't raise his arm much above his head at anytime. He didn't go wild, but he conducted close to his waist. Of course, I always felt that with musicians like he had, you could turn around and conduct. [laughter]. But he was marvelous, and I've seen him at the high school conduct a band. I saw him conduct a Marine Band, and I always had great respect for his name and for him. My first memory of the "Stars and Stripes Forever" was when I was only about six years old back in Italy. A band there played that march. That's when it was first published. I was just a boy. The bands over there played standing up; they didn't sit down to play a concert back in those days. I imagine the modern bands do sit down, because I saw a concert in 1969 in Milano, Venice at the St. Mark's Square and they sat down. Back in those first years, back in 1910, they didn't sit. And they marched down the street in a group. No ranks and files, just a big group. They wouldn't keep in step either. They would play a symphony going down the street-- a symphonic march going down the street, not with the beat. But later on they got into it.... So I had something to do with practically every band that's ever existed around here in one way or another. I had another piece of good fortune. This John Houbolt was my bass drummer in my New Lenox Band. And when he was here for Houbolt Day about two, three years ago I had charge of the music. Do you remember the night at the



field? I don't know if your band paraded that night at the field. Well, I had charge of the band.

CONNER: Yes, I remember that. You had all the high school bands.

MATTEI: Yes, the high school bands, the grade school bands. I lined them up and I conducted that. I can remember Mr. Houbolt; he had a brother there, too, in the band, but he played the bass drum.

CONNER: I remember that very well now. I was with the American Legion Band and we were the escorts putting the different bands into position.

MATTEI: I'm going to quote this: "Mr. Mattei started a music career back in 1910 with the famous Mattei Brothers Saxophone Quintet and Orchestra. He played with the first Joliet Grade School Band from 1910-14. He played with the first high school band from 1912-14 the first two years while he was still in grade school. From 1914-24 Mr. Mattei was a member of the various bands throughout the area including Dellwood Park Band, Stellworks Club Band, the Italian Band, Moline Plowmill, Shabbona Band, and conducted the Frankfort Illinois Band. In 1929 he organized the New Lenox Grade School Band and remained there until 1933 when he took over the job of reorganizing the Rockdale Grade School Band. At present he directs the Chaney Grade School Band. He conducts a band at Manhattan School. He teaches music at Reed School





in Lockport and owns and operates his own music store. Mr. Mattei was a master sargeant with the Militia Band from 1941-44. He has been a member of the Championship American Legion Band for the past six years. He has also played in several theater and dance orchestras. He was educated at Joliet Junior College, DePaul University, School of Music. I'll tell you something that would be interesting to you. I happened to be in Kentucky visiting my son down there, and there was a woman who was the sister of the man who owned the music store in Bowling Green, Kentucky. This woman came from the state of Washington. When she found out that I was in the group there (we were celebrating the Fourth of July) she insisted on sitting next to me. She said she was a bandsman over in the state of Washington, "Some of that Joliet tradition if you rub my shoulder may rub on me." [laughter] So you see how the Joliet tradition has expanded all over. I will say that in the last eight, ten years that that tradition is kind of evaporated due to the fact that other communities have come up with good bands. Not that we play worse than we used to. We play just as good here as we used to, maybe better, but so have the other groups advanced. It's easy to improve a poor group, it's awfully hard to take a good band and make that better. That's where the ability shows. Like Mr. Revelli who was here a week ago; he took a good organization and made them play a little bit better. That's what he did. But when you can go into a group, and you've got a bunch of youngsters that don't know the first thing about it, well, inside of three, four weeks you can make them play the first two





measures of "America" that sounds half-way decent, that's tremendous progress--that's tremendous. And that's the hardest work in the music business, for the grade school teachers to start the real beginner. If it wasn't for the grade school fellow that keeps him interested, we wouldn't have any college musicians. He's just like the farmer that has to plant the corn so we can have oatmeal or so we can have cornflakes [laughter]. Well anyway, my first encounter with Mr. Revelli was years and years ago when I was playing a dance and was substituting for one of Mr. Falletti's men. Bill Revelli was there; he was related to Falletti some way. He was there playing violin.

CONNER: Was this in Joliet?

MATTEI: This was down here in a little town near Coal City. I played that dance job. That's my first meeting with Mr. Revelli, and I met him many times after that. He became a very fine violinist, and by that I mean a violinist, not a fiddler, but a violinist. He did play with the Joliet High School Band a little on bass horn, a little bit. I think he fooled with the bass horn. Then later on he got the job over in Indiana in the year 1924, '25, '26. He used to come to Joliet on Sunday afternoons for two or three months, and my brother and I, helped him with instruments--fingering and how to blow them to get them started over there. With all the music background that he had, it was easy for him to get started. He knew what something good was--what good pitch



was, good tones; he knew that. He started from nothing, and he developed a tremendous band. I heard him once at a contest at Evanston, and the three judges stood up and applauded when he got through. I've never seen that--I never say it before or after. When I conducted a band at a contest the judges never got up and applauded [laughter].

CONNER: He is very dramatic, though. I remember just from that one Sunday of practice. You could tell the difference as a player. He just got everything out of it.

MATTEI: Well, he brings everything out of himself. And we've been close friends ever since--since way back then. We always thought well of Bill and always liked him. Bill was never one that would stick his nose up at somebody that was a little inferior to him, and that's a great attribute, a great thing for anybody to have. Bill has a good a smile for you and for me and for everybody. You seen him that day. That's not put on; that's real.

CONNER: At first we were afraid of him, but once we got to know him that Saturday, everybody just responded.

MATTEI: Well, sure, sure. He knew what he was after.

CONNER: I'd like you to talk about this picture once again from the twenty-fifth silver anniversary.

MATTEI: This picture was the twenty-fifth anniversary so, in other words, this picture was taken in 1913. Lot of good boys here. This is the band that rehearsed in the wood



shop that A. R. McAllister was conducting. If you ever happen to be in my store, my old store downtown, go into that first music studio and you'll see a music stand in there--a homemade music stand. I made that in high school back in 1914--a wooden one that you can pull up and down. It has a big music lyre up here. A. R. McAllister helped me design that, and he showed me how to make it. He was a carpenter teacher, and he showed me how to cut the wood and do the design and all, and that's been in existence ever since. So someday I'm going to ask Bob if he'd like to have that, because I made that. Now coming back to this picture, what else can I tell you?

CONNER: Those few men you were telling me about. . .

MATTEI: That are still here? Out of this picture that was taken in 1914 I know definitely that Elmer Brockway is with us and Aldo Maieli is with us and Howard Schluntz the insurance man is with us. Howard Gehrig is with us and myself is with us also [laughter]. This is a good book.

CONNER: What is the name of it again?

MATTEI: The Story of Musical Instruments. From (the Shepard to) the Pipe to Symphony by Schwartz.

CONNER: And these other books you have here?

MATTEI: This book here is Music Lovers Encyclopedia. I'm kind of proud of this one, because in here there's a kinsman





of mine listed here. This Mattei is a distant relative of ours. He was a professor conductor. "Mattei Tito-Pianist to King of Italy--received gold medal from Pope Pius IX--conducted at H. M.'s Theater in London--toured Europe 1865-1871." Not too much is known about this fellow, but he's a distant relative of ours. These books were used by the Dellwood Park Band under the direction of Mr. West. And later on after Mr. West retired from conducting the band, my brother took over this collection of books. They were used for many, many marches down Joliet's streets. If a person wants to become a musician the first thing is learn piano, get background in piano. And with that background, you can do almost anything. And if you love band music, then naturally study your brass and reeds so that you can do something with them. Don't try to be proficient in all of them, because you can't, but pick one of your choice and become excellent on that one and learn enough about all the others so that you can basically help youngsters that come to you for help. You don't have to be a French horn player to help a kid start, if you know which is the right way. It's the same for all the instruments. Learn enough about them, if you want to become a music teacher. And be good to the kids. Oh, once in a while you want to slap them, sure. Slap them in the right place and not with vengeance. Then the next day forget it [laughter] that's right. Don't carry a grudge. If a kid does something today, tomorrow he won't even remember he did it.



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